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Colonial Settlements in the Río de la Plata: Between Transference and Development of Spanish Urban Models

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The territory: Paraguay and Río de la Plata

- ¹ In the late fifteenth century America joined the Western world and became the Spanish Empire's new borderland. American space, in turn, had its own limits, such as the region of Río de la Plata, in Argentina, distant from the metropolis as well as from the viceroyalties of Peru and New Spain.

The condition of the region of Río de la Plata as a geographic, geopolitical, and strategic borderland marked the processes of conquest and colonization as well as influencing cultural processes that commenced with the arrival of the Europeans. The borderland, as a boundary, gave the occupation of this territory a temporary, diffuse, and changing character (fig. 1).

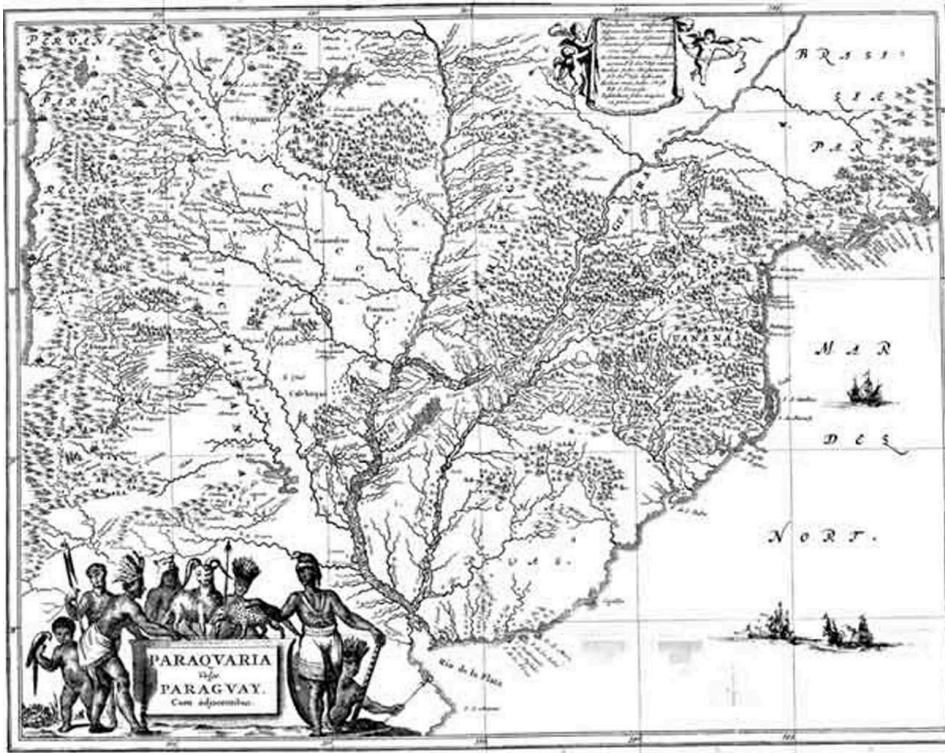


Fig.1 : Map of Paraguay and Río de la Plata, by L.Ernot, 1632.

Historiographic problems

- 2 The region of Río de la Plata's doubly marginal condition raises questions about the transference of both European and American historiographic models.

In the first place, the European periodization—valid for a world in which ruptures and changes operate within the context of deep cultural continuities—is not applicable. In the region of Río de la Plata the architectural and spatial products that appeared after the conquest and throughout the colonial period were marked by the violent irruption of European culture.

In the second place, the original local cultures consisted of groups of hunters and gatherers that moved cyclically throughout the territory, building temporary habitats from provisional and non-durable materials. Europeans did not find in this building tradition aspects to be taken into consideration when building their permanent settlements or architecture. Therefore, the local aborigine contribution was almost nonexistent and consisted mostly in providing manpower for heavy labor that the Spaniard either requested of or imposed on them.

In the third place, the peripheral and borderland location of Río de la Plata demanded that the European colonizer concentrate his efforts on survival under conditions unfavorable to the artificial transplanting of foreign cultural realities. This kept the concept of *tabula rasa* from being applied and meant that the genesis of a new space could not be controlled from the realm of ideas or theories.

Then, how do we propose interpreting colonial space in the Río de la Plata in relation to traditional European or American historiographic constructions?

Discarding the concept of style that for so long bound architectural history to traditional art history, which emphasized form while omitting the process of

production, is not enough.

Nor does it seem proper to use the theoretical premises that during the Renaissance started to give shape to European architecture as a parameter for appraising and limiting the object of study because, while architecture in Europe began to form as a discipline, in the remotest areas of America, on the periphery of the periphery, disciplinary borders were completely blurred.

Architectural production in Río de la Plata stressed its empirical aspects before theory could become a principle of design or the ideation of space. Theoretical knowledge was replaced with practical knowledge. Gathered, shared, and communicated experiences generated a popular and traditional architecture decanted over centuries that resisted change.

Therefore, a proper historiographic perspective should respond to the historical conditions that stretched and altered projects and ideas. Confronting ideas with reality opened the possibility of innovation when faced with that which was different and experimentation when faced with the unknown.

Territorial organization

- 3 The different tribes that inhabited the region before the arrival of the Spaniards shared certain cultural features but were not grouped into political communities on a regional scale. This predominantly natural space, fragmented into multiple human groups, was organized by the Spaniards as a single administrative and political unit.

At the same time, the exogenous character of the new power center was also incomparably new in America. Both sea and interior river port cities acquired then special meaning as key points for interaction with the metropolis, that is Spain; at the same time the very presence of the water way symbolized a via of contact with that remote center. The rivers, in the interior of the continent, constituted the possibility of clear penetration and a guarantee of the land's fertility.

American historical cartography in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries is an eloquent testimony to the importance of the rivers in making it possible to penetrate the territory. The ways of drawing the water ways in the maps of the territory and the level of detail used visually emphasize on their importance.

Territory, understood as a space appropriated and valued by human groups, constitutes itself as a product of work and of representation.¹ According to Gilberto Giménez, the dynamic character of territorial production implies three kinds of operations: surface delimitation creating *grids* that divide and subdivide space at different scales, the installation of *nodes* or population centers that are hierarchically related and the knitting of a *net* that binds three or more nodes together. Studies of the Río de la Plata case in which this cultural and historical territoriality concept is applied are still pending. This paper's brevity will only allow a few statements that should be the object of further development.

It is interesting to note the importance the European granted to the river in order to define and articulate these three operations. The division and distribution of the rural land was done in reference to the waterways. Population settlements were located along the rivers and fluvial communication was preponderant for the establishment of communication networks.

Rural land distribution was measured along the front part that ran along a river or stream; quite often the depth of the lots was not given. This can be seen in the

distribution of small farms called “*chacras*” in Buenos Aires and Santa Fe, and in large cattle ranches called “*estancias*.” Although the latter were larger tracts of land, they were measured in the same way.

The territory the Spanish perceived as empty seemed ideal for the implantation of rational and theoretical ordering. For this reason, in their origin, the territorial jurisdictions assumed geometrically simple shapes, with limits imposed upon an unknown nature. These ideal schemes were disturbed by geography and by the resistance of the original inhabitants of the regions.

The settlements that lasted were linked from north to south along the rivers: Asunción (1537), Corrientes (1588), Santa Fe (1573), Buenos Aires (1580), and, much later, Montevideo (1726). Minor settlements were inserted along the same fluvial routes. Two land routes, transversal to that axis, connected the region with the Portuguese colonies in Brazil (São Paulo) and with the last links of the Spanish occupation from the central Andes (Tucumán).

The region’s peripheral character and its distance from Spain reduced the chances for controlling the territory and the processes of architectural production. Instead, the communicative force of the river fostered human and cultural bonds between towns in Paraguay and in Río de la Plata, favoring the conformation of an architecture with regional features. Alternative communication with the Portuguese and the Andean worlds contributed slighter—although perceptible—influences.

From the perspective of urbanism and the organization of the territory, we can distinguish those Spanish settlements that were deliberately founded but had a spontaneous growth from those with a layout planned from the beginning. Military facilities contributed to securing domination of the territory. Lastly, Indian settlements founded for the purpose of evangelization posed new alternatives to spatial organization. These different spatial structures are dealt with below.

Spanish settlements with spontaneous growth

- 4 The first Spanish settlements in the region were improvised military nuclei. Sancti Spíritus (1527), Buenos Aires (1536) (fig. 2), and Asunción del Paraguay (1537) were places protected with ditches, terraces, and wooden fences. Inside, the buildings—as provisional as the defenses—had no particular layout.

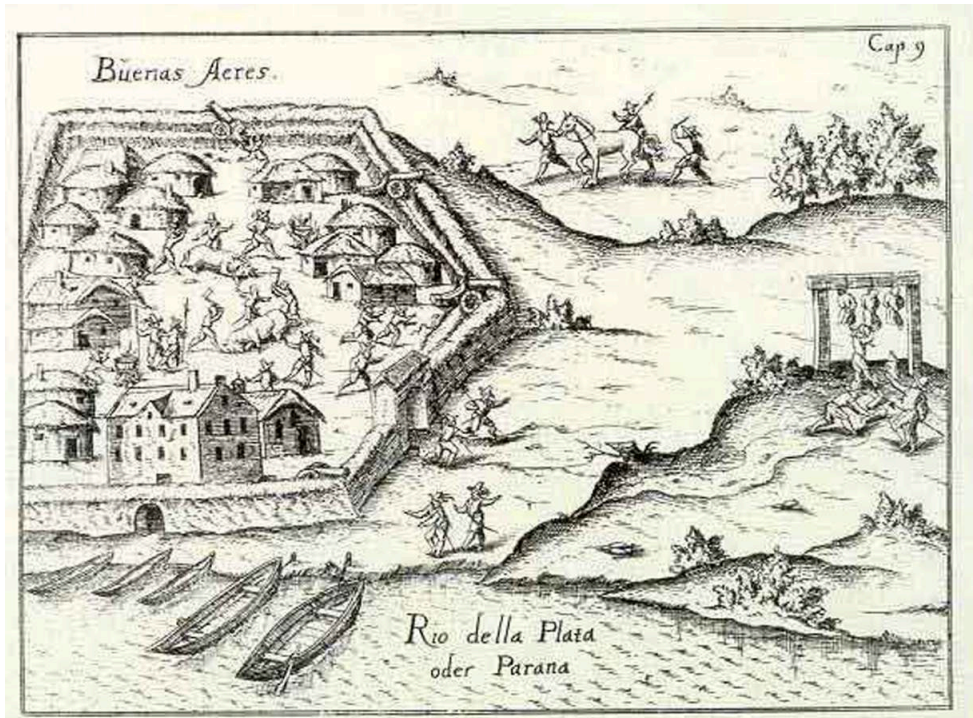


Fig.2 : Buenos Aires, 1536, by the Ulrich Schmidl' chronicle of 1567.

- 5 The contrast between these forts and the “three stone fortresses” that had to be built by Pedro de Mendoza in 1534 illustrate the distance between the world the conqueror expected to find and the real conditions of the space conquered.

The distorted image sixteenth-century Europeans had about the American world and the way in which the conquest evolved is exemplified in the fantastic drawings that appeared in the 1567 German edition of Ulrich Schmidl's chronicle. One of them shows the first fort in Buenos Aires and inside it, among some precarious, European-style houses, what—according to the artist—might be Governor Pedro de Mendoza's residence, represented as a German epoch house with two floors, attic, tile roof, and chimneys.²

The local reality altered those plans and visions. During the first decades of the conquest, those forts provided shelter and a learning space for the first generations of colonizers. The settlements that lasted, such as Asunción, grew and spread without order, according to the local topography and needs. The medieval European city growth patterns were spontaneously reproduced. However, building techniques and the manners in which land was occupied generated very different spaces marked by nature and open spaces.³

Spanish planned settlements

- 6 The urban layout already used in other parts of America reached the Río de la Plata with the foundation of Santa Fe, in 1573. Lima, capital city of the viceroyalty of Peru, was the reference model (fig. 3).



Fig. 3: Fort in Santa Fe, Florian Paucke, xviii^e siècle.

- 7 The perfect and idealized grid with which the urban land was distributed in the second Buenos Aires, in 1580, shows the vocation for geometry as organizer of an ideal isotopic space. Building the real city altered and disturbed that initial support. Cartographic representation offers the possibility of contrasting the initial ideas against the urban realities built over time. The map of Buenos Aires⁴ shows the perfect grid of the layout spreading over the territory without any compromises. The pure geometry of the model of the Spanish-American city is made up of blocks of identical shape and size, from which a homogeneous and repeatable occupation of space is assumed. A later map, dated in 1776,⁵ represents the same city using the typical codes of cartographic drawings of the epoch: the layout has spread but what is most noticeable is that the blocks show a very different density. The building process developed within the lots—resulting from the slow accumulation of multiple individual decisions—has unbalanced the original grid's abstraction. The area around the central square or plaza has a greater density of buildings which decreases toward the periphery slowly disintegrating.

Indian settlements

- 8 The mission settlements established by the Jesuits for the evangelization of the Indian population have a planned organization of the urban space, alternative and different from the cities of the Spaniards. Instead of an undifferentiated grid with its core in the central plaza, the Guaraní Jesuit missions present a T-shaped urban structure. The central square maintains its preeminence but the force with which the axis ends at the compound of the Church and the Fathers' House, emphasizes the meaning of religion as the organizing principle of space. Systematically arranged dwelling units were large, subdivided rooms. This is one of the few recognizable aspects of the survival of communal dwelling practices of the Indians adapted to a new cultural reality.

In general, the *reducciones* (missions)⁶ of Mocoví and Abipón Indians had a layout similar to that of the Guaraní missions. However, the late process of urbanization of these communities and their autonomy regarding the earlier ones resulted in a non-systematic and scattered organization of the dwelling units.

Military settlements

- 9 The frontier condition demanded the installation of forts in strategic places in order to secure the conquered territory and to advance in the occupation of new spaces. Despite their provisional appearance, forts built with wooden palisades are the ones that best respond to the changing boundaries: they can be quickly built and left behind when necessary.

However, the Spanish imaginary transferred models across time. According to Ramón Gutiérrez, the forts of San Ildefonso del Tauá (1692) and San Agustín de Arecutauá (1719) in Paraguay illustrate the persistence of medieval fortress models, with high walls, semi-circular bulwarks, an exotic “Castilian lodge,” or an homage tower. Built in stone, they soon became obsolete within the context of the Paraguayan jungle and a border with the Indians in constant flux.⁷

Between the transferal and the development of urban models

- 10 From the late fifteenth century onwards all of America became a field for urban and architectural experimentation. The European culture tended to transfer its models and ideals in order to apply them as a part of a huge colonizing enterprise. Roberto Fernández considers “the persistence of an attitude of experimentation”⁸ as a Latin American condition, born in that context.

The urban and territorial developments that reshaped geography and space in Río de la Plata resulted from that permanent experimentation. The colonial period was the first stage of that transformation. The other great moment was the agricultural colonization carried out in the second half of the nineteenth century, when original ways of land subdivision and founding of new towns were implemented.

In the twentieth century, phenomena related to development (poverty and internal migration in the periphery of cities) have increased their autonomy in relation to planned action. Up to today, urban and territorial policies promoted by the government have not been able to contain informal manners of spatial appropriation and city growth.

Since then, the field of experimentation has been greatly increased. The study of transference and development processes generated during the colonial period provides elements for reflection about phenomena and conditions that continue to affect space in Río de la Plata in present day Argentina and in Latin America in general.

NOTES DE FIN

1. Gilberto GÍMEZ, *Territorio, cultura e identidades. La región socio-cultural*, Instituto de Investigaciones Sociales, UNAM, Mexico, document presented at *Diplomado de Análisis de la Cultura*, 1998.
2. Ulrico SCHMIDL, *Vera Historia*, facsimile edition, Buenos Aires, Imprenta de la Biblioteca Nacional, 1942.
3. During Gaspar Rodríguez de Francia's rule, in 1821 and in 1823, aiming at setting a regular layout, streets were laid again, winding streets were eliminated, some streets were straightened and widened and many buildings were demolished. Ramón GUTIÉRREZ, *Evolución urbanística y arquitectónica del Paraguay. 1537-1911*. Resistencia, Departamento de Historia de la Arquitectura de la Universidad Nacional del Nordeste, 1978, p. 59. The maps of Asunción before the rectification can be seen in: Alberto DUARTE DE VARGAS, *Cartografía Colonial Asuncena*. Asunción del Paraguay, Municipalidad de Asunción-Academia Paraguaya de la Historia, 2001.
4. Map that shows the distribution of lots made by General Juan de Garay to the founders of Buenos Aires (Archivo General de Indias, Ref. Buenos Aires, 11), published by Javier AGUILERA ROJAS and Luis J. MORENO REXACH, *Urbanismo español en América*, Madrid, 1973, plate 205.
5. "Plano de la ciudad de Buenos Aires capital del Virreinato del Río de la Plata en la América meridional" (Archivo del Servicio Histórico Militar, Ref. No. 6.268, hoja 4/Pb. 10-28) published by AGUILERA ROJAS and MORENO REXACH, fig. 211.
6. The term *reducción* is used to refer to settlements of Indians converted to Christianity.
7. Ramón GUTIÉRREZ, *Evolución urbanística y arquitectónica del Paraguay. 1537-1911*. Resistencia, Departamento de Historia de la Arquitectura de la Universidad Nacional del Nordeste, 1978, pp. 35 and 37. ARCHIVO GENERAL DE INDIAS (Sevilla), Mapas y Planos, Buenos Aires, 225, Castillo de San Ildefonso.
8. Roberto FERNÁNDEZ, *El laboratorio americano. Arquitectura, Geocultura y Regionalismo*. Madrid, Biblioteca Nueva, 1998, p. 81.

RÉSUMÉS

Historiographic approaches to colonial settlements in the Río de la Plata—today Argentina—must consider its condition as a space for the contact between different realities. Confronting European ideas with American reality opened the possibility of innovation when faced with that which was different and experimentation when faced with the unknown. It is vital also to consider the analysis of the territory and its components as a necessary means for understanding the process of the construction of new spaces.

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Mots-clés : architecture coloniale

Index géographique : São Paulo, Lima, Amérique, Asunción, Buenos Aires, Corrientes, Amérique Latine, Montevideo, San Agustín de Arecutauá, Sancti Spíritus, San Ildefonso del Tauá, Santa Fe, Tucumán, Argentine

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